Irish farmers protest against Mercosur trade deal

ATHLONE: Thousands of Irish farmers, many of whom travelled across the country on tractors, protested on Saturday against the European Union's Mercosur trade deal after a majority of EU states gave a provisional go-ahead for its largest ever free-trade accord.

Opponents led by France, the EU's largest agricultural producer, failed to convince enough fellow member states on Friday that the deal with South American nations would flood the market with cheap food products and undercut domestic farmers.

Under pressure from opposition parties, farming groups and members of its own coalition, the Irish government argued the deal lacks safeguards on what it says are weaker food safety standards in South America.

"It's an absolute disgrace on behalf of the farmers and people that have put Europe where it is today," said Joe Keogh, a farmer from the central village of Multyfarnham at the protest in the nearby town of Athlone. "It's going to close down the whole countryside." Protesters held placards reading "Don't sacrifice family farms for German cars", "Our cows follow the rules, why don't theirs", and "Sell out".

The demonstration, large by Irish standards, followed similar protests in Poland, France and Belgium on Friday.

While Ireland is a small exporting nation that aims to diversify away from its reliance on the US market, it has large beef and dairy industries that are major employers.

Opponents of the deal have secured some concessions and compensation for EU farmers. The European Parliament must approve the accord before it can take effect, and like France, Ireland has pledged to fight for its rejection in what could be a tight vote.

"The Irish farmer is at great risk as it is. We're a small country, we don't have large farmers and farmers struggle to make an income from the farm as it is," said Niamh O'Brien, a farmer who travelled from the western town of Athenry.—Reuters

TRACTORS on a road during a farmers' protest in Athlone, Ireland, against the EU-Mercosur free trade agreement.—Reuters

North Korea accuses South of drone incursion

SEOUL: North Korea accused the South on Saturday of flying another spy drone over its territory this month, a claim that Seoul denied.

The North Korean military tracked a drone "moving northwards" over the South Korean border county of Ganghwa in early January before shooting it down near the North Korean city of Kaesong, a spokesperson said in a statement carried by the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

"Surveillance equipment was installed" on the drone and analysis of the wreckage showed it had stored footage of the North's "important targets" including border areas, the spokesperson said.

Photos of the alleged drone released by KCNA showed the wreckage of a winged craft lying on the ground next to a collection of grey and blue components it said included cameras.

South Korea said it had no record of the flight, and Defence Minister Ahn Gyu-back said the drone in the photos was "not a model operated by our military". The office of South Korean President Lee Jae Myung said a national security meeting would be held on Saturday to discuss the matter.

Lee had ordered a "swift and rigorous investigation" by a joint military-police investigative team, his office said in a later statement. On the possibility that civilians operated the drone, Lee said: "if true, it is a serious crime that threatens peace on the Korean Peninsula and national security".

Located northwest of Seoul, Ganghwa County is one of the closest South Korean territories to North Korea. KCNA also released aerial images of Kaesong that it said were taken by the drone.

They were "clear evidence" that the aircraft had "intruded into (our) airspace for the purpose of surveillance and reconnaissance", Pyongyang's military spokesperson said.—AFP

Storms leave 100,000 French homes without power

Black ice could cause 'disruption' in Scotland, England, says Met Office

LONDON: A man was killed after a tree fell on a caravan in England after record winds brought by Storm Goretti, as 100,000 homes in France were still without power on Saturday.

Some 15 people have died in weather-related accidents this week across Europe as gale-force winds and storms caused travel mayhem, shut schools, and cut power to hundreds of thousands in freezing temperatures.

The storm barrelled through southwestern Cornwall and parts of Wales overnight Thursday to Friday, with gusts of up to 160 kilometres per hour (100 miles per hour) downing trees and leaving tens of thousands of homes without power.

A man was found dead in the town of Helston in Cornwall on Friday after a tree fell onto a caravan, UK police said.

"Tragically, a man aged in his 50s was located deceased within the caravan," Devon and Cornwall police said in a statement.

Most of the UK remains under a weather warning for snow and ice on Saturday, the Met Office national weather agency said, warning that black ice could cause "disruption" in Scotland and northern England.

Heavy snowfall followed by the storm meant that some 250 schools in Scotland were closed for the much of the first week back after the Christmas break. Around 28,000 homes were still without power at the start of the weekend in southwestern England and the Midlands, according to the network operator National Grid.

Storm Goretti also ploughed through other parts of northern Europe, with nearly 100,000 homes in France still without power on Saturday morning.

Meanwhile long-distance rail traffic slowly resumed on Saturday in northern Germany, after being completely suspended on Friday due to another storm named Elli, rail opetaor Deutsche Bahn said.

In the far north of the country, the port city of Hamburg, heavily affected by a large amount of snow, remains particularly impacted by the disruptions, it added.

A number of rail services will still not be restored on Saturday, notably those linking Hamburg to Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Hanover.

Services from Hamburg to the western Ruhr region or to Berlin are expected to be restored over the course of Saturday, it said.

Rail operator Deutsche Bahn halted its long-distance rail service for the north of the country stranding thousands of travelers.

Many roads and rail connections elsewhere in the country were also affected by high winds and heavy snowfall. Public bus transportation was canceled in many regions and schools stayed shut in some areas.

Two people died in a head-on collision between two cars in Bavaria, when one of the cars skidded, presumably because of the winter weather. In the Upper Palatinate region, a driver was killed when his car veered off the road and crashed into a tree.

Ferry services on the North Sea coast of Lower Saxony have largely come to a standstill, as several islands became inaccessible by boat because of strong easterly winds, including Langeoog, Spiekeroog, Norderney, and Wangerooge.—Agencies

Six killed after trash site collapses in Philippines

MANILA: Hard hat-wearing rescue workers and backhoes dug through rubble in search of survivors on Saturday in the shadow of a mountain of garbage that buried dozens of landfill employees in the central Philippines, killing at least six.

About 50 sanitation workers were buried when refuse toppled onto them on Thursday from what a city councillor estimated was a height of 20 storeys at the Binaliw Landfill, a privately operated facility in Cebu City.

Rescuers were now facing the danger of further collapse as they navigated the still-shifting wreckage, Cebu rescuer Jo Reyes said on Saturday.

"Operations are ongoing as of the moment. It is continuous. (But) from time to time, the landfill is moving, and that will temporarily stop the operation," she said.

Cebu City councillor Dave Tumulak, chairman of the city's disaster council, said another two bodies had been uncovered Saturday by crews working in 24-hour shifts.

The discovery brings the death toll to six, while 32 people remain missing. "We found another two bodies, but we cannot retrieve the bodies because of the heavy metal beam that fell on them, so we are trying to cut the metal," he said.—AFP

Nasa targets ISS medical evacuation for Jan 14

WASHINGTON: Nasa crewmembers aboard the International Space Station (ISS) could return to Earth as soon as Thursday, the US space agency said, after a medical emergency prompted the crew to return from their mission early.

"Nasa and SpaceX target undocking Crew-11 from the International Space Station no earlier than 5pm ET on Jan. 14, with splashdown off California targeted for early Jan. 15 depending on weather and recovery conditions," the agency said in a post on X.

Details of the medical evacuation, the first in ISS history, were not provided by officials, though they said it did not result from any kind of injury onboard and that the unidentified crewmember is stable and not in need of an emergency evacuation.

The four astronauts on Nasa-SpaceX Crew 11 have been on their mission since August 1. These expeditions generally last around six months, and the crew was already due to return to Earth in the coming weeks.

American astronauts Mike Fincke and Zena Cardman, as well as Japan's Kimiya Yui and Russia's Oleg Platonov, would be returning, while American Chris Williams will stay onboard the international body to maintain a US presence.—AFP

Venezuela-style strike on Taiwan could prove tricky for China: analysts

HONG KONG: Some Chinese online users are calling for a lightning Venezuela-style snatch of Taiwan's leaders in a prelude to taking over the island, but analysts, scholars and security officials say China's modernising military is still far from ready.

In Taiwan, they say, China's military has an adversary which has prepared for years against a "decapitation operation" on its leaders, besides extensive air defences and radar capabilities, as well as likely support from the United States and its allies.

Although China has spent years acquiring advanced weapons, questions remain about the capabilities of its People's Liberation Army in using them effectively, as well as a command structure that must knit them together in combat.

"Once such an operation runs into trouble, it would quickly escalate into a full-scale conflict, with extremely high political and military risk," said Chen Kuan-ting, a lawmaker.

Taiwan's layered air defence and early warning systems meant any air assault or special operations infiltration effort would risk detection as it crossed the Taiwan Strait, foreshadowing escalation, he added.

The United States showcased its forces' battle-tested air dominance with last weekend's operation to extract now deposed Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro.

Its military controlled the skies with stealth fighters, jets that jammed enemy defences and covert reconnaissance drones feeding commanders real-time intelligence.

By contrast, the PLA "still has clear gaps in real joint-operations experience, electro-magnetic and electronic-warfare capabilities, and actual combat validation of high-risk missions," said Chen.

Chinese power

China, which claims Taiwan as its own territory, has not ruled out using force to bring the island under its control. Taiwan rejects China's claims. "Operationally, while the PLA is in recent times trying to get up to speed with force integration, it is still baby steps compared to what the Americans have for decades been accumulating," said Singapore-based security scholar Collin Koh.

Taiwan is determined to defend its sovereignty and boost its defence, President Lai Ching-te said last month, after Beijing fired rockets towards Taiwan as part of its latest military drills. The drills surrounding Taiwan — the most extensive to date — were accompanied by strong messaging from Chinese officials and the military.

"Any external forces that attempt to intervene in the Taiwan issue or interfere in China's internal affairs will surely smash their heads bloody against the iron walls of the Chinese People's Liberation Army," China's Taiwan Affairs Office said in a statement. In October, Lai unveiled a multi-layered air defence system called "T-Dome".

It is intended to be similar to Israel's "Iron Dome", with a more efficient and "sensor-to-shooter" mechanism for a higher kill rate that integrates weaponry from Taiwan-developed Sky Bow missiles to US-supplied HIMARS rocket systems.

In July, Taiwan's military staged a drill to protect Taipei's main airport from a hostile landing, deploying portable stinger rockets and tanks.

Extraction operations

While military attaches say China has war-gamed extraction operations in Taipei in a broad range of military options to take control of Taiwan, some Chinese online users tom-tommed the US action in Venezuela as inspiration.

"The Venezuelan situation has provided us a solution for unifying Taiwan," said one user on the X-like microblogging site Weibo.—Reuters

NEWSMAKERS

MOSCOW: People attend an ice sculpture festival in Victory Park during the New Year and Christmas holiday season.—Reuters

DEVOTEES wearing masks take part in the voodoo festival in Ouidah, Benin.—Reuters

Benin showcases culture with voodoo festival

OUIDAH: On the newly-renovated streets of Ouidah, thousands of Beninese and foreign tourists gathered this week to discover the rituals and deities bound up with voodoo, a popular animist tradition which has grown to become the focus of a international festival.

For some years now, the Beninese government has been promoting the ancestral religion as the spearhead of an ambitious tourism policy. The old Vodun festival, celebrated on Jan 10, has given way to Vodun Days, a three-day festival of dancing, mask parades and traditional ceremonies in the coastal city just west of capital Cotonou also known for its role in the Atlantic slave trade of bygone centuries.

Although scenes of animal sacrifices on altars have been kept far from the tourist gaze there has been no question of diluting the sacredness of the event's ceremonies.

On the Fort Francais esplanade, guardians of the night in Zangbeto masks, acting as sentinels of social order in the voodoo rite, emerged in a straw whirlwind to cavort in hypnotic and mysterious fashion before an audience of devotees mixed in with equally fascinated tourists.

A little farther away, in the sacred Kpasse forest, followers of the deity Kokou performed as if in a trance a circular dance to the beat of drums, daubed in a yellowish powdery substance.

"I've been really enjoying the groups performing at the Sacred Forest. It feels more authentic than the big stadium ... 'shows', for lack of a better word," said Australian tourist Kate Mills, 37 "I think here it doesn't feel like a show as much. It is a performance for the performers, not for us. And we are invited to watch, but it feels more authentic as a result.—AFP

CATANIA (Italy): Snow and smoke blanket Mount Etna volcano amid freezing temperatures in Europe.—AFP

HWACHEON (South Korea): A woman fishes through a hole on a frozen river during an annual ice fishing festival.—AFP

CHENNAI: Participants create traditional decorative artworks known as 'Kolam' along a street during the Mylapore Festival on Saturday.—AFP